

Archived Information

Interim Evaluation of the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory Synthesis Report

Introduction

The Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory (McREL), one of ten Laboratories funded by the U.S. Department of Education through a competitive process, is currently in a five-year funding period (December 1995–December 2000). During the third year of the current contract, all Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs) are required to undergo a peer-review interim evaluation conducted under the auspices of *Standards for Conduct and Evaluation of Activities Carried Out by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) for Evaluation of Recipients of Grants, Cooperative Agreements, and Contracts*, hereafter referred to as the *Evaluation Standards*.

The panel selected for the interim evaluation of McREL consisted of Robert Donmoyer (Director, School of Educational Policy and Leadership, Ohio State University), Morris Lai (Director of Evaluation, Curriculum Research & Development Group, University of Hawai‘i and Panel Chair), Diane Lassman (Director, The EXCHANGE, Minneapolis, MN), Jessie Pollack (Educational Coordinator, Measurement and Research, Maryland State Department of Education), and H. Wesley Smith (Superintendent, Summit School District, Frisco, CO).

As required by the *Evaluation Standards*, panelists reviewed documents on Laboratory operations and a sampling of materials selected collaboratively by Decision Information Resources, Inc. (DIR), McREL, and the OERI Program Officer assigned to the McREL contract. In addition, the Panel conducted on-site data-collection activities at McREL’s Aurora, CO office May 3–7, 1999 (agenda attached) including (a) attending presentations on the Laboratory’s operations and management, the two signature programs selected for review (*Moving Standards into Practice* and *Partnerships as a Field Service Strategy*), and other programs or components of programs funded primarily or exclusively by the OERI contract; (b) a group telephone interview with four McREL Board of Directors members representing three of the seven states

McREL serves under its REL contract with OERI; (c) group interviews with two groups (from Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) and State Educational Agencies (SEAs) with contracts with McREL in the area of standards-based education); (d) two group interviews with individuals who work in organizations serviced by the Laboratory's field service team, and (e) an interview with McREL's U.S. Department of Education Program Officer.

This synthesis interim-evaluation report has been organized basically along the lines of the format recommended for individual panelists' reports. In a slight format modification, two sections for each of the eight evaluation questions have been combined – "Recommendations for improvement" has been incorporated into "Areas of needed improvement."

Bulleted statements in bold had been used in the exit interview with McREL held on May 7, 1999, the last day of the site visit. They represent the Panel's collective compilation of highlights of responses to the evaluation questions.

I. Brief Overview of the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory

The Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory (McREL), one of the original Regional Educational Laboratories, has served the central region now consisting of Colorado, Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota, and Wyoming since 1966. The region has 20% of the nation's land mass and 6% of its population. Major cities in the region include Denver, CO; Kansas City, MO; Kansas City, KS; Omaha, NE; and, St. Louis, MO. Small towns, small cities, and rural areas, however, characterize most of the region.

Diverse and underserved populations exist throughout the region. In rural areas there is poverty that is exacerbated by the scarcity of services and communications. Underserved populations are often too small to command attention, and their educational needs are hidden within the relatively successful schools they attend.

Travel can be difficult because of long distances and weather conditions. Where air travel

is possible, travelers are subjected to multiple connecting flights and often left with over two hundred miles of ground travel to complete a trip.

All of the states of the region are involved with school reform. Some of the states are leading in the reform movement; others are slowly overcoming inertia. Several of the states in the region are among the most educationally successful in the country by traditional measures. This is both a boon and an obstacle to school reform.

Over the past 33 years, the Laboratory has had four Executive Directors. For eight years McREL has been housed in its presently leased space in Aurora, Colorado, a suburb of Denver. McREL presently employs a staff of 88. OERI Regional Educational Laboratory monies, \$11,545,727, accounted for 43% of the Laboratory's total funds during fiscal years 1996, 1997, 1998. Additional sources of funds during this contract period include \$15,268,735 from other direct federal awards, pass-through, and other contracts, royalties, publications, interest, and investments.

Opportunities to serve the region include mandates by the seven states for school districts to align curriculum and instruction with state standards or student assessment measures. McREL's specialty area for this contract period is Curriculum, Learning and Instruction. Prior to the present contract, McREL's energies had been moving toward this focus, as stated in its proposal summary for this competition in 1995.

The Laboratory has three major operating components. The first component is the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory, which includes the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) contract, the High Plains Mathematics and Science Consortium, and related federally funded contracts mainly from State Education Agencies (SEAs). The second component is the Institute, which conducts not-for-profit activities that are not federally funded and which includes non-profit contracts with districts within the region as well as districts, state agencies, and other groups outside the region. The third component is MCL, which conducts for-profit activities. The Executive Director of the REL is also the Executive Director of the Institute. A

different person serves as the Executive Director of MCL. A single person serves as president for all three components.

II. Implementation and Management

A. To what extent is the REL doing what they were approved to do during their first three contract years?

1. Strengths

• Has met contractual obligations

All panelists agreed that the Laboratory has met its contractual obligations, whether viewed in terms of (formally proposed) goals, activities, or tasks. The partnerships that are part of Signature Work #2 provide strong examples of the contractually required collaboration and constituent involvement. That state liaisons and facilitation groups are in place and functioning well is good (partial) evidence that the Laboratory, as promised in their 1995 proposal, is implementing a comprehensive set of field services to scale up and provide direct assistance. McREL has been an active member of the Laboratory Network Program (LNP) and also has provided assistance to the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) in supporting educational reform by conducting research syntheses and sponsoring conferences. The Laboratory has expanded and built upon its expertise in curriculum, learning, instruction, and school change through its extensive work in the area of standards.

• Focus has evolved into being much more standards based

Although the Laboratory's 1995 proposal committed to systemic reform, it did not address standards to a notable degree. As early as 1989, however, McREL had begun to conduct research on standards and assist the education community as it responded to the National Governors Association's call for developing national standards as the keystone of school reform. By the third year of the current contract, the Laboratory had defined itself by its connection with standards, an area of primary focus in education today.

- **Funds and resources have been leveraged**

McREL excels in using internal resources such as staff and technology to positively enhance the work being carried out under the REL contract. This critical infrastructure and strategic alliances discussed under the next bullet enable McREL to leverage funds and resources and be highly responsive to educators and other clients in the region at all levels of service. In general the Laboratory uses federal funds to support the development of programs, products, and services and then obtains funds from State Education Agencies (SEAs) and Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to scale up and disseminate within and beyond the Laboratory's region. In short, the Laboratory leverages funds and other resources to the benefit of all users in its region.

- **Extensive and successful strategic alliances**

Alliances/partnerships help keep McREL grounded in the reality of the classroom and build long-term relationships. Such alliances allow McREL to leverage its resources while allowing states and local districts to leverage their resources as well. The Laboratory has established formal long-term, field-based collaborative action-research partnerships that promote systemic reform with six of the seven states in the region. In addition, it has developed less formal, shorter-term relationships with associations and schools both within the region (e.g., Adams City High School and Skyview High School in Colorado and with the Chief State School Officers [CSSOs]) and outside the region (e.g., the POLARIS Project in Alaska).

McREL has also established multiple partnerships with university researchers to design survey items and adapt and administer them in college-level classrooms within the region (e.g., Colorado and North Dakota) and outside the region (e.g., North Carolina, Florida, and Alaska). In an effort to scale up its work in learner-centered instruction, the Laboratory has collaborated with five other regional laboratories and has been an active participant in the Laboratory Network Program (LNP).

Formal collaborative partnerships that are responsive to local, state, and regional needs have been established in various configurations such as State Facilitation Groups, Regional Field

Services Teams, and Collaborative State Action Teams. To provide services to regional constituents, McREL teamed with several Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) in Colorado and Nebraska. It also collaborated with Central Region states to develop implementation plans for the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration initiative.

In addition to formal collaborations, McREL created and maintained partnerships with a broad range of other service providers, universities, and professional associations to leverage its resources and scale up systemic reform. These included the Colorado Association of School Executives, the National Center for Educational Statistics, the National Rural Education Association, Policy Studies Associates, South Dakota Associated School Boards, and the University of Missouri at Kansas and at St. Louis. Strategic alliances have also been developed with other types of entities such as the New York Times and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

• Ethnic and gender representation on the Board

According to the September 1998 EEO Report, the gender and ethnicity composition of McREL staff is predominately female Caucasian (about three fourths of the staff are women). In contrast to this figure, at most one third of the Board is female.

The Laboratory's response to technical questions (related to the proposal it submitted for funding in 1995) noted a resolution passed by its Board that directed its nominating committee to actively seek out for membership, individuals who would provide additional representation from culturally diverse populations as well as from two job-related constituencies. In an on-site interview, however, a sample of Board members informed the Panel that they did not know of any Board efforts to improve ethnic or gender representation.

• Some deliverables have been turned in late

McREL's OERI program officer regularly submits ratings of various aspects of the Laboratory. Most aspects received the maximum possible rating of 4, with the most notable exception being the relatively frequent rating of 3 for timely submissions of deliverables. That

problem is in part explained by the shortage of staff at McREL (according to the “Jobs at McREL” link on the McREL web site, there were currently six unfilled positions, three of which were at the senior associate level). A remarkable 20% was reported as the turnover rate for 1998, suggesting that staff turnover may be worth studying to see if it can be reduced. The Laboratory has recently tried to address the problem through the use of short-term consultants. So far this approach seems to be working well, according to the Laboratory leadership. The Panel recommends that the Laboratory collect and analyze data on the degree to which it is able to meet deadlines for deliverables using this type of consultant arrangement.

B. To what extent is the REL using a self-monitoring process to plan and adapt activities in response to feedback and customer needs?

1. Strengths

• Quality assurance process in place

McREL has a detailed, standardized Quality Assurance (QA) system in place for the development of products and other deliverables. The procedures specify different approaches based on the sensitivity of the materials. According to McREL, the system was based on a review of QA processes used at other Regional Educational Laboratories.

The Panel saw evidence that the QA procedures were indeed widely used by McREL. An example in which the Laboratory used QA feedback to modify a product is shown in the response to reviewers’ comments on *Research Into Practice: Implementing Standards in the Classroom*. Workshops presented by staff regularly undergo formal evaluation.

• Annual evaluation reports (submitted voluntarily) to OERI provide specific information on actions taken based on previously identified problems

Although not required by the OERI contract, McREL has produced annual evaluation reports that report on all aspects of the Laboratory’s operations and management. The report for FY97 was comprehensive, straightforward, and well formatted. In that report, McREL delineated follow-up activities addressing problems uncovered in FY96. The FY98 evaluation report had

not been completed as of the time of the Panel's site visit. The Panel found it odd that such an evaluation report was not required by OERI.

- **Frequently collect data on client satisfaction**

McREL regularly collects data on its clients' satisfaction with the products and services produced by the Laboratory. According to the Laboratory, the purpose of these client-satisfaction data is to ensure the quality of deliverables and products as they move through the development process. A good example of the Laboratory's efforts to collect feedback from clients is the *Field Service Partners Survey* completed in 1999.

- **Regular needs-sensing meetings with the field**

McREL uses needs sensing to monitor its work. Customer feedback is elicited for training events, conferences, and products. There are regular and frequent meetings in the field with Chief State School Officers (CSSOs), LEAs, and other stakeholders. For each of the states in the region, a McREL staff serves as a liaison, who works with the State Facilitation Groups (SFGs), which are normally composed of a deputy superintendent, a researcher, and a field-services person to set the agenda for service activities in the state and Collaborative State Action Teams (CSATs), who meet at least yearly with the Chief State School Officer.

- **Self-reflection during meetings of McREL leadership and staff**

Annual staff retreats allow for self-reflection on a large scale. In addition staff keep activity logs, which are shared with other staff and recorded in a database. Regular debriefings with staff, senior leaders, and program directors include reflection on field experiences to help refine the client focus. The Panel found the efforts discussed under this bullet combined with those addressed in the previous two bullets to be a nice mix of self-monitoring methods.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

- **Improve methods used for self-monitoring (e.g., ensure appropriate sampling and adequate response rates)**

Even though it may seem antithetical to Laboratory interests, it is important to document failure as well as success. It is as important to know what does not work in school reform as it is to know what does.

McREL informed the Panel that about 14 staff members have some degree of formal, rigorous training in measurement, research, and statistics. There is a suggestion in some of the products the Panel reviewed that the Laboratory's technical expertise, particularly in the measurement, survey, and action research arena, has not been fully called upon.

Although formal evaluation mechanisms are in place and appear to get implemented, at least some of the formal evaluations seem to be questionable sources of information. For example, the telephone interview of *The Systematic Identification and Articulation of Content and Standards*, which was designed "to assess the utility and impact of [the] standards document in school districts within the McREL region," (Evaluation Brief No. 98-1, p. 2), had a sample size of only 11 from the originally identified sample of 28 interviewees.

The Panel also found much of the evaluation data collected not particularly useful for improving workshops because the questionnaires consisted mostly of fairly generic items and participants' perceptions of their mastery of the skills focused on during the sessions. At best, these are rather gross indicators and can do little more than alert presenters of extreme displeasure among participants. Just as we ask teachers to incorporate authentic assessment into their teaching (and strengthen their teaching in the process), workshop participants should be given an opportunity to demonstrate their mastery of skills taught during a session rather than simply reporting whether they believe they have achieved mastery.

The several self-monitoring efforts could be improved by (a) increasing the response rate (where the response rates were low, the Panel did not see an indication of any additional effort to increase the rate); (b) ensuring samples are representative of the population; and (c) including the

collection of data directly addressing product or program improvement.

To more fully serve the emerging measurement and research needs that defining and implementing standards have created, McREL should bring its technical staff resources into the research and assessment planning and evaluation collaborations more frequently. One panelist suggested that if current staff are overcommitted and hiring more permanent staff with expertise in measurement and research is difficult to carry out, then a possible alternative is to form a long-term national technical advisory group that convenes quarterly.

- **Use formal self-monitoring to complement informal self-monitoring**

There has been a broad array of formal (e.g., a survey) and informal (e.g., self-reflection meetings) self-monitoring activities occurring throughout the contract period. The Panel suggests that the two types of activities be used to systematically complement each other.

III. Quality

A. To what extent is the REL developing high quality products and services?

1. Strengths

- **Individual users and professional organizations see products as being of high quality**

Evidence that the Laboratory is developing high-quality products and services ranges from enthusiastic testimonials from many clients in the region to the large number of requests for publications and resources. McREL's *Compendium of Standards* is seen as a valuable resource for school reformers. During a teleconference, an educator from a state in the region noted that McREL had changed the culture of its SEA from being mainly a regulatory agency to being a resource facilitator for school improvement. Another client praised the Laboratory for its work in helping to develop standards and matching district assessments. There were cases of unaccredited schools becoming fully accredited after McREL-led intervention. These clients as well as several others expressed strong appreciation for McREL.

McREL makes good use of comprehensive literature reviews, expert panels, and field-based experiences to guide the development of its products and programs. The formal Quality Assurance procedure in place for all developing products and services helps promote high quality.

- **Services are often fully tailored to clients' unique needs**

Clients interviewed by the Panel suggested that they considered the services to be of high quality, in large part because McREL staff were willing and able to tailor what they did to fit local needs. In some cases, the clients felt that McREL staff went out of their way to customize their services.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

- **Field testing and quality assurance are often limited to client satisfaction and not focused on student outcomes or changes in teacher behavior**

Popularity and use are not the best measures of quality. The Panel recognizes the fact that for many McREL programs it may be premature to try to measure student outcomes; however, it may make sense to measure the intermediary outcome of teacher change or improvement.

When it is appropriate, the Laboratory needs to conduct rigorous studies to evaluate the impact its products or services have on students and teachers. Unless there is good information on student achievement and teacher change, one can only guess at whether the reform efforts the Laboratory promotes are positive or negative.

- **More reliance on external peer review using reviewers with technical expertise**

For the most part, research done by McREL has not gone through the traditional quality-assurance process established by the research community such as systematic review by external experts and publication in quality refereed journals. Although such journals would not be expected to be the primary publication venues for a Regional Educational Laboratory, it seems reasonable to expect that major research studies such as the meta-analysis of the instruction

literature should be submitted to the research community's traditional mechanism for validation before large amounts of federal monies are spent on development efforts based on this research.

When McREL external reviewers raised significant technical issues such as low response rate with regard to a survey conducted by the Gallup organization, such concerns were dismissed, unconvincingly to the Panel, by Gallup (see advance-reading item #168). Despite the various flaws noted by the external reviewers of the Gallup-conducted study, McREL plans to have Gallup conduct similar surveys to obtain industry's views and teachers' views. The Panel recommends that when external reviewers critique future work by agencies such as Gallup, McREL should (a) allow the reviewers to further critique the responses from the agencies and (b) adjust the Laboratory's future work accordingly.

One panelist suggested that OERI might consider accepting drafts of publishable research articles in lieu of technical reports, which seldom get read by many people.

- **Possible over-generalization or over-assertion from some of the data collected**

Despite concerns expressed about the quality of the method used in the aforementioned Gallup survey, McREL published the results with what the Panel views to be an overly bold title, *What Americans Believe Students Should Know: A Survey of U.S. Adults*. A related concern is the two aforementioned similarly flawed surveys that the Laboratory still plans to conduct.

The Gallup organization's representation on the Board of Directors of McREL was of some concern to the Panel. The fact that the Gallup executive excuses himself when Gallup contracts are being discussed is only mildly reassuring, because it is not clear that others on the Board have the technical expertise needed to assess quality issues in the area of research. It should be noted, however, that the Gallup executive is also a former university dean and a Board member who, according to the Laboratory, pushes McREL to follow up on research or evaluation findings.

IV. Utility

A. To what extent are the products and services provided by the Laboratory useful to and used by customers?

1. Strengths

- **Many local, regional, and outside-of-the-region clients indicate a high regard for McREL products and services**

McREL's products and services are used extensively; for example, the Laboratory has contracts with 33 different states and a number of foreign countries to work on standards-based reform, and a number of professional associations look to the Laboratory for assistance and materials, especially in the standards area.

The volume of work conducted by McREL is impressive. In FY96, McREL staff were involved in more than 500 training/technical-assistance activities that served more than 14,000 persons. Those numbers increased in FY97. In FY98, the Laboratory received almost \$3 million for McREL publications and non-federal contracts.

- **McREL is responding to urgent needs of clients**

By trying to be current and poised to help schools on short notice, the Laboratory has sometimes been able to serve as a resource much needed by schools under pressure to respond to mandates and initiatives (e.g., moving to (a) standards and standards-based assessment, (b) reading improvement, and (c) comprehensive school reform).

- **McREL's web site shows high and increasing usage**

Many of the Laboratory's works are available by downloading from the McREL web site. The level of use as measured by hits and time spent visiting the site is increasing and has passed the impressive level of more than 1 million hits per month. The McREL database is referenced on or hot linked to more than 1,300 other Uniform Resource Locators (URLs). The Panel was also impressed by the Laboratory's effort, through its webmaster, to incorporate the latest standards (e.g., *Web Style Guide* [Yale University Press, March, 1999] and WWW Consortium)

for ensuring that web sites are maximized for clarity and maneuverability.

McREL sites have received more than 20 awards, including the Links2Go Resource award for its collection of lesson plans, the Suite101.com “Top 5 Best of the Web Award,” one of the U.S. Department of Education’s “Picks o’ the Month for Connections+,” and NetGuide’s “Gold Site Award” for being one of the best on the web.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

- **Too much focus on standards may lead to exclusion of other important aspects of schooling**

Standards must be embedded in a larger view of school reform to improve student performance. McREL should reflect on its view of standards and how they fit in with assessment, professional development, school climate, finance equity, and other important aspects of school reform.

McREL’s focus on standards may limit its ability to respond to various other customer needs unrelated to standards. One panelist noted that although the notion that standards is the way education should go has considerable face validity as well as widespread support, one could also make the case that the standards-based approach to school reform, with its long lists of standards somewhat akin to the long lists of behavioral objectives that appeared in the 1970s, is misguided. That panelist also noted that for all its commonsense appeal, the current commitment to standards is based more on faith than it is on evidence. It may make more sense to treat the standards-based approach as one of several different approaches that McREL can propose and facilitate.

To truly assess the quality of McREL’s work in the standards area, and at the same time validate the whole standards-based approach, OERI should consider funding (1) external studies of the impact of the Laboratory’s services and products and (2) studies of the impact of standards-driven reform attempts.

- **Expand efforts to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate products and services**

The region has enough cultural and linguistic diversity that McREL's products and services could realize a substantially broader dissemination base if efforts were expanded along those lines. Such an expansion could benefit from guidance from a more culturally diverse Board.

B. To what extent is the REL focused on customer needs?

1. Strengths

- **McREL is sensitive to needs of clients and of OERI**

Most of the feedback from clients as well as from OERI has been highly positive, with several interviewees reporting that the Laboratory was very responsive and really met their needs. By sponsoring many workshops and conferences throughout the country, McREL has provided the level of support needed to facilitate major school changes. By conducting regular needs assessments, the Laboratory remains informed of the type of support schools, LEAs, and SEAs need and want. By developing and testing its products in real school settings, the Laboratory enhances the likelihood that the products will be useful to teachers and other educators. In its proposal to OERI, the Laboratory aptly noted that all the laboratories "have struggled to align the agendas of the Department of Education on the national level, the various agendas of states in each region and the needs of people not traditionally well served by existing educational systems."

- **Several mechanisms are used to identify needs**

The Laboratory regularly collects feedback from clients through diversified methods; for example, it commissioned the Gallup Organization and Quality Education Data to conduct telephone polls, held focus groups with SEA staff within the region, convened meetings with the central region's Chief State School Officers, and internally tracked information requests and feedback from McREL field staff. Program directors' meetings and brown-bag self-reflection

sessions are held at regular intervals, and the Laboratory Board engages in strategic planning every few years.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

• Missing feedback from students

Students' perspectives were generally missing in the evidence the Panel reviewed. Furthermore, the needs assessments lacked data on student performance and behavior.

• Need to use more than client satisfaction to determine whether client needs were met

Needs assessments consist almost exclusively of responses to questionnaires from clients or potential clients. The Laboratory seems to be so sensitive to clients' needs or wants that it even structures its research in its intensive research sites around the principles of collaborative action research. This sensitivity to clients' needs is laudable, but the Laboratory must realize that clients' interests and concerns may not coincide with the research questions the Laboratory needs to answer. It is important to collect data on how materials and services are used and eventually what impact such use has on the way teachers teach and how students learn. In short it is essential to know whether teachers changed and whether students improved.

V. Outcomes and Impact

A. To what extent is the REL's work contributing to improved student success, particularly in intensive implementation sites?

1. Strengths

• McREL's focus on standards is essentially a focus on student achievement

To the extent that standards-based reform contributes to improved student achievement, one can assume that the Laboratory's work contributes to improved student achievement. The Laboratory continues to stress the importance of standards-driven instruction instead of measurement-driven instruction. Clients in places such as Iowa, North Dakota, Wyoming, and

Missouri affirm that teachers are now teaching to standards thanks to McREL.

- **Starting to address diversity in relation to standards**

The Laboratory deserves kudos for linking diversity concerns to the standards movement. The Diversity Roundtable project seems like a good model for linking research and practice. It commissions research papers from well known scholars and uses these as the basis for (a) interaction between practitioners or policy makers and these scholars and (b) the development of more practitioner-friendly materials.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

- **Lack of baseline data to allow for monitoring change/effect over time**

The Panel found the general absence of baseline student data troublesome, because if there is no basis for comparison, it is virtually impossible to determine the impact of any product, service, or intervention. The Laboratory suggested that reconstructing the data years later as needed was a way to resolve this concern. The Panel regards such reconstruction of student data as an extremely difficult process and the reconstruction of data on teacher behavior and practice as virtually impossible.

- **Evidence of student success or of intermediary indicators such as teacher behavior is limited**

Although self-report data on participants' satisfaction and perceived benefits are valuable, they are not sufficient to inform design of quality professional-development activities. As recommended by the Standards on Professional Development, McREL should evaluate the impact of its professional development on participants' achievement (an example of such information on achievement was the data on the improvement of 12th grade writing in Minot, ND).

The Panel did not come across data that could be used as intermediary indicators. One way to gather such data would be to conduct structured observations by trained raters to

determine how and to what degree teachers are using newly acquired knowledge, skills, and abilities in their classrooms. From that point, one could start evaluating how those changes might be linked to improved student learning on the standards.

B. To what extent does the Laboratory assist states and localities to implement comprehensive school improvement strategies?

1. Strengths

- **McREL's products and services are widely used, and it is recognized at the local, state, and national levels as a leading expert on standards and on comprehensive school reform**

Standards are at the heart of comprehensive school reform. The work of McREL to make standards available, understandable, and usable by SEAs and LEAs is of tremendous assistance to the field. Comprehensive school reform strategies begin with standards.

McREL uses its expertise and prominence in the field of standards to help states and districts implement reform. The Laboratory has created a reform presence in the mid-continent region that would be hard to imagine there without McREL.

McREL's four comprehensive and collaborative applied research and development programs, implemented in full partnership with stakeholders in each of the seven states in the region, created tools and strategies that facilitated systemic reform for all students. Regional Field Service Teams developed services based on the specific needs of each state and the cross-cutting needs of the region.

Testimonials the Panel heard from people in the field suggested that the Laboratory provided significant technical support at the local and state levels for implementing the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) legislation in the region. All states have now qualified for funding. Although it is difficult to determine precisely McREL's role in the states' success, the testimonial evidence suggests it was substantial.

- **A concern for standards-based reform permeates virtually all of McREL's activities**

By permeating the Laboratory's activities, the concern for standards-based reform seems to be more integrated than would be the case if standards were seen as a more discrete entity. Although the Panel found this permeation to be a strength, at the same time, it is concerned about over-reliance on standards as the (only) way to successful school reform.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

- **Given its national prominence, McREL needs to ensure that its products and services are solidly research based**

Because the Laboratory is so influential, it needs to be especially careful about passing off speculation as research-based knowledge. It might be desirable to publish speculative thinking in the form of debates or symposia to which people with different perspectives contribute.

During the most recent Congressional debate about funding research, there were complaints that much laboratory and research center work was simply ideology. McREL needs to be sensitive to this issue and make sure that its work is not speculation or ideology masquerading as research-based findings.

- **Need to better address the issue of time as it relates to the teaching of standards**

The issue of the time it takes to address standards for various students versus the time available is vital to successful reform. McREL raised the issue to a very high level of national attention and now needs to address it explicitly. The utility of Laboratory products and services would be improved if they reflected a greater recognition that there is very important school life beyond standards and assessment. It is important to not assume that all the time in schools is available for addressing standards.

McREL has a vested interest in demonstrating the efficacy of standards in promoting improved student achievement in general. In particular, the Laboratory should study which

standards and instructional approaches to standards are most successful in promoting overall student achievement.

A related issue is that the Laboratory has not shown concern for what may be the negative effects of a headlong implementation of standards-based reform on students, teachers, and state school systems. Many of the states, and many schools within the states, have historically been very successful educationally. Care should be taken to not risk what already works. McREL should consider documenting and studying successful schools, which might not be using an approach centered on standards.

C. To what extent has the REL made progress in establishing a regional and national reputation in its specialty area?

1. Strengths

- **McREL has a national and international reputation in the area of standards as they apply to curriculum, learning, and instruction**

To the extent that standards-based reform can be thought of as encompassing much of curriculum, learning, and instruction, the Laboratory has indeed developed a national and international reputation in its specialty area. McREL is currently providing services or having its products and programs used in places throughout the U.S. By adapting and implementing content standards, McREL has developed a model for tracking standards and benchmarks in the content areas identified in the National Goals. The Laboratory has developed and disseminated print resource materials, monitored and integrated research literature, provided extensive professional development opportunities, sponsored numerous conferences and workshops, presented at regional and national forums, and developed extensive partnerships with U.S. Department of Education-funded institutions and service providers.

Among its most widely used products are *Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education* and *The Fall and Rise of Standards-Based Education*. Other popular publications are *Comprehensive Guide to Designing a Standards-Based Classroom, School and District*; *Awash in a Sea of Standards*; and *Eight Questions You*

Should Ask Before Implementing Standards-based Education at the Local Level.

The Laboratory has cooperative working relationships on specific projects with nationally prominent institutions or agencies such as the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Lockheed Martin Astronautics, National Education Association, Phi Delta Kappa, the International Reading Association, the National Council of Teachers of English, the American Psychological Association, and the New York Times. The Laboratory and its partners such as ASCD have published numerous Laboratory-developed materials. McREL is well represented in professional journals (e.g., *American School Board Journal*, *Journal of Science Education and Technology*, *The Professional Educator*, *Technology in Education*, *Phi Delta Kappan*, *Education Week*, and *Educational Psychologist*), books (e.g., *School Wars* [Jossey-Bass], *Internet Links for Science Education* [Plenum Press], and *The Learner-Centered Classroom and School* [Jossey-Bass]), and presentations at professional conferences (e.g., American Association of School Administrators, National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, American Educational Research Association, and American Psychological Association).

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

- **Given its national prominence, McREL needs to ensure that its products and services are solidly research based**

So great is the reputation of McREL regarding standards that it must now be more circumspect in its pronouncements about the subject. Being among the most highly reputed experts on the matter gives the Laboratory great credibility and influence. The assessment design and development work essential to standards-based research and reform is often more controversial and loaded with decision options that have numerous benefits and trade-offs than the identification of the content standards themselves.

VI. Overall Evaluation of Total Laboratory Programs, Products, and Services

McREL is a successful Regional Educational Laboratory. Its cutting-edge work on standards can potentially have tremendous positive impact on students. The Laboratory is making a great contribution regionally and nationally to the cause of school reform, especially with regard to incorporating standards.

McREL is service oriented, committed to responding to customer needs.

To ensure high quality, the Laboratory needs to address concerns related to research and development issues. It is also important for the Laboratory to reflect on how its work fits into the larger milieu of today's schools.

The Laboratory is being challenged to attract and retain highly skilled staff in a highly competitive market and in a location with a relatively high cost of living. This challenge is interfering to some degree with the ability of the Laboratory to move ahead as quickly as it otherwise could. Within the Laboratory, diversity of staff is an ongoing concern, and progress has been slow.

VII. Broad Summary of Strengths, Areas for Improvement, and Strategies for Improvement

McREL's strengths are numerous. They have a multi-talented, energetic, caring, and motivated staff with a shared goal: To be the standard on standards and the operating system ("McREL inside") of the standards movement. By leveraging funds from other sources, they have accomplished an enormous amount of work. They are engaged in cutting-edge projects, for the most part, which are on track and within expected timelines except for a few deliverables. The two signature works positively impressed the Panel. When modifications to the proposed work have occurred, justifications have been convincing. The work quality is the direct result of the talent combined with a formal quality-assurance program and a caring involved governing board.

Based on the site presentations and interviews and a review of the advance materials, the major areas of concern and need are (1) a more systematic and rigorous collection of evaluation data, attending to issues such as representativeness, sample size, and response rates; (2) viewing the standards-based approach as not necessarily the exclusive approach for education; (3) collecting data on student performance and teacher change; (4) increasing cultural diversity on the Board as well as on the Laboratory staff; and (5) the production and dissemination of peer-reviewed work in refereed journals.

Finally, the Panel wishes to acknowledge McREL's full cooperation in the evaluation. Without such excellent collaboration, the evaluation would have been almost impossible to carry out within the agreed-upon parameters.